

Alan Bruce, PhD
Director of Criminal Justice, Quinnipiac University
Supporting HB 5432 AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL BASED ARRESTS
Judiciary Committee
March 12, 2012

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee: My name is Alan Bruce and I am here as Director of the Criminal Justice Program at Quinnipiac University in Hamden and as a resident of West Hartford. I strongly support HB 5432 and believe it is important to the educational success of all Connecticut youth.

The amendments proposed in HB 5432 are both necessary and desirable as a mechanism for ensuring the appropriate use of school based arrests. There is a long documented history of discriminatory punishment against minority youth in the juvenile justice system and, more recently, in the use of sanctions in schools. For example, the New York Times of March 6, 2012 reports evidence from a recent study that while "black students made up only 18 percent of those enrolled in the schools sampled, they accounted for 35 percent of those suspended once, 46 percent of those suspended more than once and 39 percent of all expulsions," and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stated that "The undeniable truth is that the everyday education experience for too many students of color violates the principle of equity at the heart of the American promise". Evidence of the negative impact of harsh school punishments and in school-arrests on academic success abound, and are recognized by many, including Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as a significant component in the "school-to-prison pipeline" (OJJDP News at a Glance July/August 2011). In fact the problem is recognized as so severe that the US Departments of Justice and Education have created the Supportive School Discipline Initiative to reduce the use of school punishments that contribute to alienation from school and, ultimately, increase the likelihood of school failure. Clearly in-school arrest is a policy that can contribute to this alienation and school failure. It may be argued, however, that the use of arrest in school is warranted because of increased school violence. If we look at data on typical

school violence such as fighting, figures from the National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2011/figures/figure_13_1.asp) indicate this is not so as violence has fallen overall amongst students in grades 9-12 from 1993 – 2009. Given the reduction in school violence there is good reason to question the utility of school-based arrests and to be concerned these may discriminate against many groups comprising our national and state schools.

To assess the effectiveness of any policy and to determine whether it is applied in an appropriate way data are needed and this is what the amendments in HB 5432 call for – a system whereby the circumstances under which school-based arrests are recorded and made available for analysis to determine the policy's effectiveness and whether it is unfairly targeting any group of Connecticut youths and forcing them into the school-to-prison pipeline. The changes in HB 5432 are consistent with recommendations by the Director of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), John Laub who has called for "translational criminology" in which policy implementation decisions and evaluation efforts are shaped by the evaluation of data (<http://www.nij.gov/nij/about/speeches/translational-criminology-3-1-2011.htm>). Without the amendments proposed in HB 5432 we do not have the data and are unable to adequately examine the policy of school-based arrests to determine whether they are necessary and, if so, whether they are used indiscriminately.